



# THE INQUIRER

£1 | Issue 7964 | 1 June 2019

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians

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## Unitarian Women

new book traces

legacy of dissent

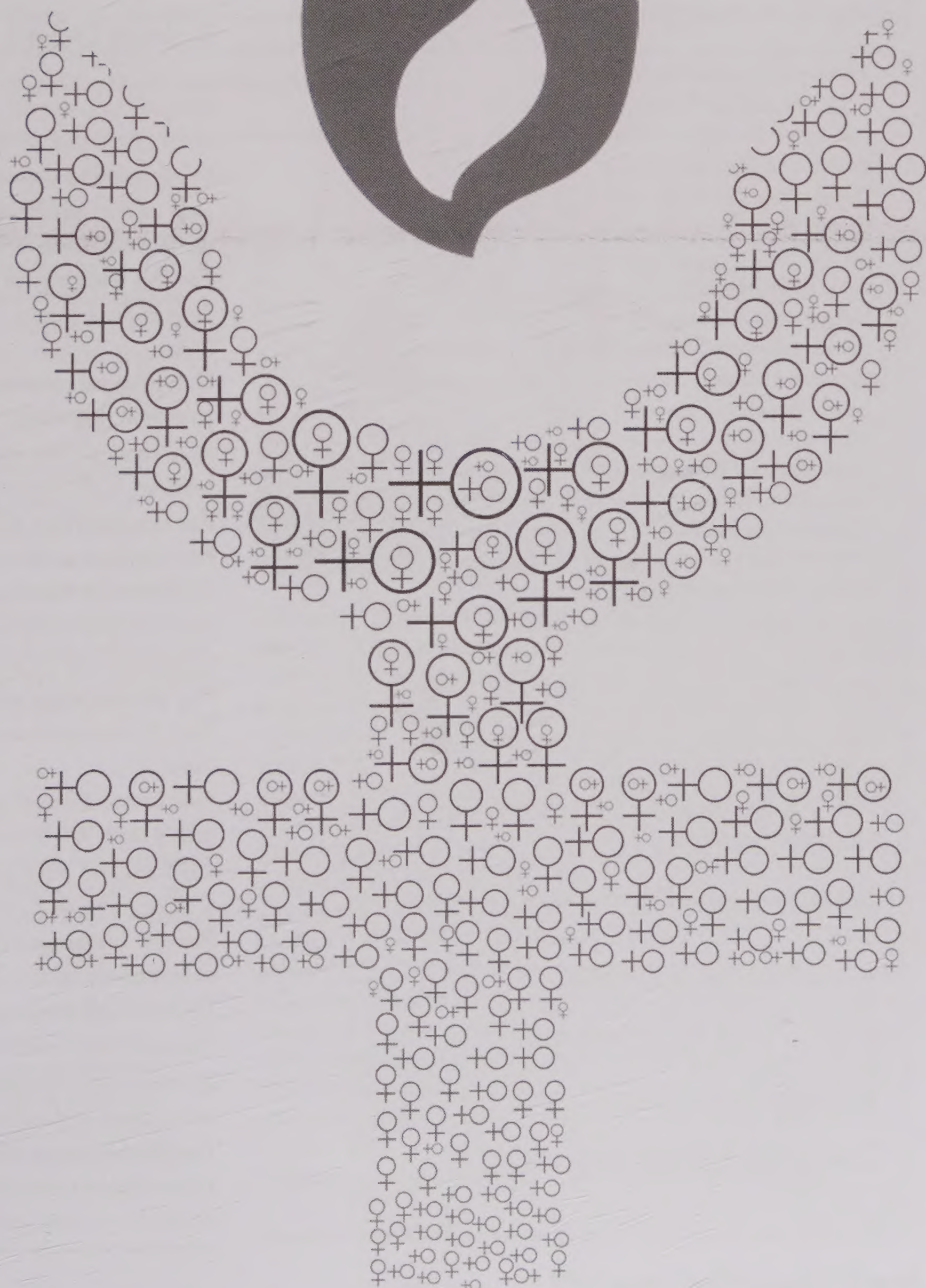
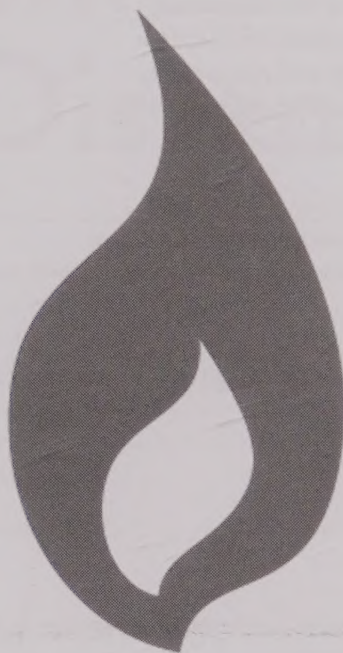
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# THE INQUIRER

The Unitarian and Free Christian Paper

Established in 1842, The Inquirer is the oldest nonconformist religious newspaper.

**“To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition.”**

From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001

The Inquirer is published fortnightly by The Inquirer Publishing Company (2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

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**Cover:** Illustration created with a Pixabay image.

Articles express the views of their writers. Submissions are welcome and may be edited for content and length. They should be emailed or typed and should be the writer's original work or be attributed appropriately.

**Annual subscriptions** are £38 with discounts for bulk orders. Cheques payable to 'The Inquirer'.  
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**Advertise** for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £95 plus VAT. Contact the editor for details.

**Births, marriages and deaths:** 50p a word + VAT.

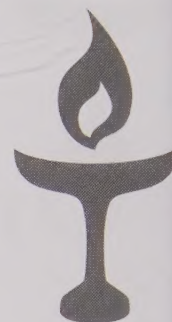
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## Inquiring Words...

Let us consider the flame, burning in the chalice before us, symbol of the freedom we have to find our own way to the Divine, whatever that may mean to each of us individually. May we hold our freedom lightly, tempered with reason not dogma, and strengthened by respectful tolerance.

From the Unitarian General Assembly meetings closing act of worship, written by GA President Celia Cartwright.



## A prayer for your spirit

By Laura Dobson

Imagine you are standing on the edge of a stone circle, facing north. Feel the earth beneath your feet. Bring to mind blessings of the physical realm in your life in the past year – health, finances, material possessions, and winter times of stillness and rest.

### **For the blessings of earth, we give thanks.**

Turn to face East and feel the air as a gentle breeze on your face.

Call to mind blessings of the Mental realm in your life in the past year, learning – classes and studies, books and articles you have read, all the other ways you have grown in knowledge and wisdom. Call to mind Spring times of inspiration and clarity.

### **For the blessings of Air, we give thanks.**

Turn to face south and feel the heat of the sun on your face.

Call to mind blessings of the Behavioral realm in your life in the past year – work and hobbies, accomplishments, travels and creations. Call to mind Summer times of flourishing.

### **For the blessings of Fire, we give thanks.**

Turn to face west and feel water as cool rain falling on your face.

Call to mind blessings of the Emotional realm in your life in the past year – relationships – friendships, emotional healing and support, and ways you have grown socially and emotionally. Call to mind Autumn times of letting go.

### **For the blessings of Water, we give thanks.**

Turn to face the centre of the circle.

Call to mind blessings of the spiritual realm in your life in the past year – sacred connections with the Divine – spiritual guidance and insights on experiences, transformative dreams and visions and other forms of spiritual growth.

### **For the blessings of Spirit, we give thanks.**

Laura Dobson is a Unitarian ministry student. She led this prayer at the Unitarian General Assembly meetings.



Ann Peart introduces the book she edited which offers a hidden history of dissent.

# Unitarian Women A Legacy of Dissent

As in most other denominations, there are usually more women than men in Unitarian congregations; yet the story of the movement is often told through men's experiences. We know little of the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences of women Unitarians before the 21st century. For most of the time that Unitarianism has existed as a movement in the UK and Ireland, women's experiences of social situation, expectations, education, employment, and so on have differed from those of men, and so they have experienced the world, including their religion, from a different perspective. This book is an attempt to explore the ways in which Unitarian women have experienced their faith, and how it has influenced them in their activities in the wider world.

The women portrayed here are not necessarily typical of many in Unitarian congregations. Our brief from the Lindsey Press Panel was to write about Unitarian women who made a difference to their world. This means that to qualify for inclusion the women for the most part have had to be pioneers, to push boundaries, and go beyond what most women did. Therefore by definition they stand out from the majority of women in Unitarian congregations.

If anyone is in doubt about the maleness of the image of Unitarianism presented by our historians, a glance at the indexes of any standard text, such as works by Len Smith and Earl Morse Wilbur, will show that Unitarian women are almost entirely absent from them. The compilation of works by Alan Ruston, *On the Side of Liberty: A Unitarian Historical Miscellany*, published by the Lindsey Press in 2016, still gives an overwhelmingly male picture. However, Alan has written several chapters for this book (and has indeed produced other work on Unitarian women).

## Women excluded from doctrinal debates

The male bias in our history creates a partial and limited picture. For example, those literate men who dominate our history were usually educated in academic theology and biblical studies, and they generally felt it necessary to define, promote, and develop Unitarianism primarily as a system of belief. Women, on the other hand, have until comparatively recently been excluded from formal theological education and have generally shown less interest in the niceties of doctrine. Instead, they have been much more interested in praxis – the action element of the reflection/action process – and in religious practices and communities. The way in which allegiance to a Unitarian community had an impact on everyday life and social relations often differed according to gender. For example, it has been



**An excerpt:  
Rosalind Lee  
(1884–1959)**

Emma Rosalind Lee (left) was one of the most prominent women in the Unitarian movement in the first half of the 20th century. Her parents, Thomas Grosvenor and Winifred Hannah (née Notcutt), belonged to a well-known and respected

Unitarian family in Birmingham, where her father was a solicitor. After graduating from Cambridge (Newnham College) in 1906, she wanted to enter the ministry, but her father persuaded her to wait 10 years and gain more experience before committing herself. So she spent some time doing social work in Birmingham and widened her Unitarian experience by becoming involved in the formation of the British League of Unitarian Women, serving on its first committee from 1908. The following year she became a Reid Trustee of Bedford College, continuing until at least the 1940s.

During the First World War she worked in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). The war resulted in a shortage of male preachers, and as part of her ministerial training she served; first as lay charge, then as minister of the Glanrhondda Unitarian Chapel in Pentre, near Treorchy in south Wales. As her war work prevented her from going to either Manchester or Oxford for ministry training, she studied at home, passing all the examinations with such high marks that she was awarded a Hibbert Scholarship in 1920. This enabled her to travel to the United States and study for a year at Radcliffe College,





By telling the stories of women of different times and spheres of interest, we have tried to show how their faith related to their public actions.

Shown left: Ann Peart, left, and Catherine Robinson at the launch of *Unitarian Women: A Legacy of Dissent*. Photo by John Hewerdine

**Rosalind Lee: Continued from page 3 >**

Cambridge (Massachusetts). She then toured **Introduction:** Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, visiting every Unitarian congregation in those countries, and spending six months as co-minister of the Melbourne congregation.

On her return to England she was appointed to serve the Narborough Road Church in Leicester (where Gertrude von Petzold had ministered 20 years earlier). This congregation had fallen on hard times, but Rosalind was able to restore it to a healthy state, with much hard work. While she was in Leicester (1923–9), she served as a co-opted member of the City of Leicester Education Committee. After five and a half years she left Leicester to become the Honorary Secretary of the Unitarian Women's League, based at Essex Hall in London. For two years she combined this with ministry in the service of the Hackney congregation, but then moved to Wales to become District Minister of the South East Wales District (1932–46), while continuing her work with the Women's League.

### Concerns about refugees' welfare

She had maintained her interest in the Welsh communities and, as National Secretary, had organised relief parcels to be sent to Rhondda Valley congregations suffering unemployment in the depression of the late 1920s; she continued to support those most in need during her district ministry. For a number of years she combined her work in Wales with her Women's League activities, and in 1931 her generosity enabled a house near Essex Hall to be bought and staffed as a hostel, known as League House, to accommodate members and foreign visitors. Rosalind maintained her interest in international affairs, becoming Secretary of the International Union of Liberal Religious Women in 1934, but her plans for its expansion were prevented by the Second World War, and it was not until 1947 that she achieved its reorganisation.

In 1938 British Unitarians, concerned about the plight of Sudetenland refugees in Czechoslovakia, raised funds to support them, with Rosalind appointed by the Women's League to go and investigate how the money could be best used. She flew to Prague (where there was a Unitarian congregation) in October 1938 and together with John McLachlan, another British Unitarian minister, set up and ran for several months a relief centre with the Quakers, working with Nicholas Winton to co-ordinate transport for refugees trying to leave the country. Many children managed to reach England and were looked after by guarantors in all parts of the British Isles. Rosalind herself

fostered two or three Austrian refugee children and brought them to live on the Gower coast, eventually supporting them through university. Her reports of the Czech situation and the plight of the refugees did much to rally British Unitarian support for the work.

In order to concentrate on it, Rosalind had relinquished much of her work as Secretary of the Women's League, and was about to be nominated as its President when she was elected President of the British Unitarian General Assembly (1940), the second woman (and first woman minister) to hold this post. Throughout this time Rosalind had maintained her Welsh district ministry and is remembered fondly in these words, recorded in 2004: 'a truly generous and gracious lady, usually dressed in black and with a deep carrying voice' ... 'a strikingly masculine-looking person in a plain tweed suit, shirt and tie, stiff brimmed hat and no-nonsense presence' ... 'she always wore black, with big boots; she thought nothing of walking over 10 miles over the mountains to take a service'.

In 1946 Rosalind left Wales for her final ministry in Stourbridge. This was near the land, Kinver Edge, that she and her siblings had donated to the National Trust in 1917 in memory of their parents, and she enjoyed hosting Unitarian gatherings there on the campsite that she set up. Suffering from severe arthritis in her hands, she retired in 1953 and two years later moved back to the Gower, where she died in 1959. She bequeathed more land on the Gower peninsula and at Kinver to the National Trust, and left her house at Penmaen to the congregation of Swansea Unitarian Church.

Her most important legacy is probably in the lives of the children whom she rescued from Czechoslovakia, and in the transforming power of her ministries in England and Wales, where her words and deeds were remembered for many years.

– **Ann Peart**

For notes on sources, see '*Unitarian Women: A Legacy of Dissent*'. Rosalind Lee portrait courtesy of Stourbridge Unitarians.



### Ann Peart

The Rev Dr Ann Peart is a Unitarian minister, historian and former principal of Unitarian College, Manchester. She is also an honorary member of the Unitarian General Assembly.



# REVIEW

An engaging read,  
a labour of love

**UNITARIAN WOMEN: A Legacy of Dissent:**  
Edited by Ann Peart: Lindsey Press, 2019:  
ISBN: 978-0-85319-002-9

By Ernest Baker

Why me for this review? Someone who shall be nameless suggested very forcefully it should surely be a woman writing this. Well, as a mere man, I shall have to do my best!

Ann's book fills an undoubted historical gap, answering the question, 'what about the women'? Well here we have quite a cornucopia of information about some of our heretofore-unsung heroes, of whom there are not a few, of both genders. Andrew Hill, who contributes to this volume, along with Alan Ruston, both proper Unitarian historians alongside the author, pointed this out to us ministers some years ago.

On receiving my review copy I dipped in several times, and each time was immediately engaged. There are some familiar names: Harriet Martineau, Gertrude von Petzold, Margaret Barr. Unfamiliar ones too, to me anyway: Mary Hayes (p40), Barbara Leigh Smith, later Bodichon (p54), Margaret Ashton (p140), Margaret Gillies (p67).

There are five parts, leading from the 18th Century to 1970, 'beyond which it is difficult to have a sense of perspective', each with an introduction. The history of Unitarianism, the difficulties with which the author recognises, is not just of ideas, but of real people. Ann succeeds in bringing many of them to life; our spiritual forebears after all, we might reflect.

Somewhat at random... stories I noted: Gertrude von Petzold, not allowed to sit at a table with the male ministry students at Oxford college, until one talked the others round; Elizabeth Gaskell, describing herself as a 'sermon hater', writing to a US friend, 'Oh for some really spiritual devotional preaching instead of controversy about doctrines – about which I am more and more certain we can *never be certain* in this world'; Harriet Martineau, it seems, an 'item' with John Stuart Mill! Also a stranger to me was Lucy Aitkin, niece of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who '...represents a transition between the rational dissenting women of the late 18th century and the Victorian Unitarians ... brought up in [an] environment where children of both sexes were encouraged to participate in rational discussion and to read widely.' (p43); and Margaret Gillies, for whom 'art was a means of drawing attention to the divine spirit' (p67), present in all folk.

Noted too is the paradox of attempts to create a practical national identity alongside increased theological diversity, followers of Martineau and Priestleyans. Plus ça change?!

The bibliography is a rich source for historians and interested layfolk alike for further exploration.

Thank you Ann; I'm guessing this was a demanding, but satisfying, labour of love.

Buy it, read it, be inspired – whatever your perceived gender orientation!

*The Rev Ernest Baker is a Unitarian minister and is tutor for the 'History' and 'World Religions' modules of the Unitarian Worship Studies Course.*

## A Legacy of Dissent

Continued from page 3 >

noted by feminist historians that, in particular for middle-class women, church-related activities provided one of the few ways in which it was acceptable to exert an agency that transcended the public/private division in Victorian society.

The roles that women were able to play within Unitarian communities were historically very different from those taken by men. The ministers, committee members, officers, and decision makers were male, while women taught the children, visited the sick, and made the tea. This gave women a different perspective on their faith, and on their opportunities to make a public impact.

### Undeclared Unitarians included

It is sometimes very difficult to identify particular Unitarian women. Friendship networks extended beyond sectarian boundaries, and this sometimes blurs the distinction of who counts as a Unitarian. I have included some women who did not call themselves Unitarian, or who rejected their family upbringing as Unitarian, but who had sufficient connections with the movement and influence on it to have played a significant role in the story of Unitarian women. Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, and Bessie Rayner Parkes fall into this category. I hope that a picture of

Unitarians emerges that is different from that presented in traditional history books: a picture grounded in interaction with everyday people, rather than with theological or theoretical ideas. One thing that stands out is the importance of the Unitarian beliefs that no one is damned and that everyone can be helped to achieve a better life and overcome adversity, especially through education.

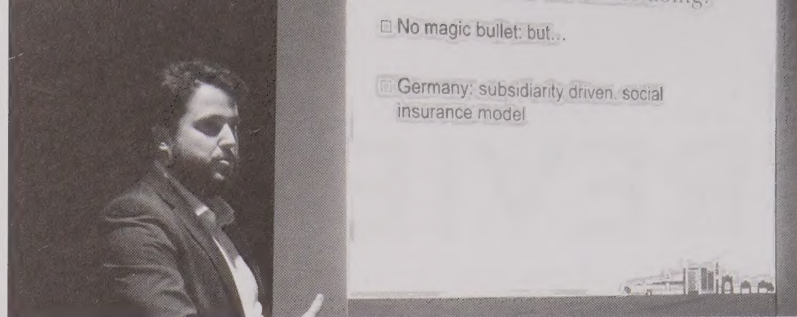
### Faith context for actions

It must be emphasised that this book does not attempt to be a history of Unitarian women – that would be a much larger and more systematic work. Rather, by telling the stories of some women representative of different times and spheres of interest, giving an idea of their achievements, I and my fellow contributors have tried to show how their faith context related to their public actions.

The book is divided into five parts and is arranged in an approximately chronological order, except for Part Five, which is geographically based. It begins with the rational dissenters of the 18th century and ends about 1970, beyond which it is difficult to have a sense of perspective. Each part has an introduction written by me, giving the background and context, followed by chapters on individual women or groups of women.



# Bruce Chilton on the GA Penal and Social Affairs Presentation



*Shown above: Patrick Hall addresses the PSAP gathering. Photo by John Hewerdine*

## Social care is in crisis

Members of panel of Penal and Social Affairs of the Unitarian General Assembly (PSAP) put on a slot at the Annual Meetings to address concerns about social care of the elderly.

Is there anyone in the UK who does not worry about the care of a relative or their own care when it is their turn to be elderly? The Penal and Social Affairs Panel (PSAP) presentation to the GA meetings in April certainly caught the interest of a great number of the delegates at the annual meetings. It was the biggest audience ever for a PSAP Presentation.

Patrick Hall is a research fellow on the Economic and Social Research Council's Sustainable Care Programme based at Birmingham University. He began by telling us what 'social care' is – 'the activities and relations involved in meeting the physical and emotional requirements of dependent adults and children' together with their economic and social frameworks. Is social care in the UK in crisis? It is in the newspapers. *The Sun* recently reported 'Care for the elderly on the brink of collapse...' *The Scotsman*: 'Crisis in Care sees families asked to step in...' and *Wales on Sunday* 'Everyone agrees social care is in crisis but no one knows what to do...' So where has this crisis come from?

Patrick Hall explained the background. From the 1950s, there was 'industrial care' usually in large institutions, families were stable and less mobile and the UK population was relatively young. With 'care in the community', the institutions have gone. Work has changed families from sole-breadwinner to dual-earner, and the women who more often looked after the home and provided care have gone into employment. But the main reason for the crisis is much longer life expectancy, with far fewer younger people. UK governments have been well aware this problem was coming. Pension ages are increasing for both men and women. But acting to solve the problem of care for the increasing numbers of elderly seems to have eluded them. A problem made into a crisis by the current 'austerity'. This is not a problem only for the UK. The broad social trends are international. Germany has created four 'pillars of social insurance' and continues with recent legislation. Australia has made similar taxation laws while Japan, with a very long-living population, is trying to extend working lives and persuade many more women into work.

The strains on families, the principal care-providers, of continuing to provide care are clearly showing financially and in shortage of time. Employment in caring does not offer any

Reverse the austerity cuts and scrap the central government's 'one-size fits all' approach both to expenditure and social care policies.

solution since it is unattractive and so poorly paid. Many such jobs are taken by immigrants which hostile immigration policies will not help. Patrick Hall was very robust in his criticisms of the freewheeling social care system in the UK. The austerity programme of the Coalition Government 2010-15 and the Conservative Governments since has created inequalities across the country. The King's Fund assesses that spending per adult fell 13.5% during 2010 -16. But because it was to areas with the highest social needs that most financial support from central government went, it is where the biggest cuts have

fallen. So the North-East, London, West Midlands, North-West and East Midlands have done badly and are where social care expenditure is most in crisis. Patrick's graph showing it was exactly these areas which voted to leave the European Union made the point that the vote was used to express dissatisfaction with the then government.

So what are Patrick Hall's solutions for this social care crisis? Put simply, they are to reverse the austerity cuts and scrap the central government's 'one-size fits all' approach both to expenditure and social care policies. Payments to families for their currently unpaid caring would be one immediate answer and relieve many difficulties. But most of all, action by the Government and Parliament to recognise the past mistakes, choose an effective social care system and legislate accordingly. Questions for Patrick came thick and fast from professional and amateur carers, the rest of us, alike. Patrick answered many questions expressly – another action would be for statutory care leave from employment. The lack of expenditure means falling standards, the current race to the bottom in social care, and is pushing expenditure back to big providers and big institutions. The caring now being done by children is a scandal. Are robots a future answer? They are not: robots may care for you but cannot care about you. Care is really about personal relationships.

It is clear that the GA's new one-hour slot was not enough for any debate on social care.

*Bruce Chilton is a member of the Unitarian General Assembly Penal and Social Affairs Panel, and is a member of the Octagon Unitarian Chapel, Norwich.*



**Feargus O'Connor** reports the USPS heard that doubt plays a role in the study of parapsychology.

# Proof is not possible

David Taylor, secretary of the Unitarian Society for Psychical Studies (USPS) and editor of its journal, has been investigating paranormal phenomena for over 30 years. His research has been featured in *The Sunday Times* and on Radio 4 and BBC television.

Among the phenomena David has investigated are ghosts, telepathy, psychokinesis, out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, and evidence for the survival of post-mortem consciousness. He aptly quoted the social theorist Stuart Chase: 'For those who believe, no proof is necessary. For those who don't believe, no proof is possible.'

It is therefore significant that the USPS had among its presidents the Oxford philosopher HH Price, the psychologist Sir Cyril Burt, the eminent Unitarian biologist Sir Alister Hardy and the author Arthur Koestler. For over half a century the USPS has undertaken exhaustive study in this field.

Several distinguished Unitarians have made valued scholarly contributions and written important books on life after death. In his popular work *Beliefs of a Unitarian* Alfred Hall wrote: 'Unitarians believe in the immortality of the soul and seek to base their beliefs on rational grounds ...' In 1945 *A Free Religious Faith* concluded that a belief in post-mortem survival was legitimate and surmised that as we 'develop higher powers and become more sensitive, this evidence will be provided'. Unitarians have long been rightly sceptical. As Somerset Maugham observed: 'The Unitarian very earnestly disbelieves in almost everything that anybody else believes, and ... has a very lively sustaining faith in [we don't] quite know what.'

## Psychical studies attract scientists

David stressed that for closed-minded materialist dogmatists the mind is 'confined inside the skull and mental processes are nothing but electrochemical brain activity'. This materialist worldview, predominant among many scientists if not great philosophers since the late 19th century, has been challenged by several profound and original thinkers, including members of the Society for Psychical Research, which has attracted many eminent scientists, philosophers and other academics since its foundation in 1882. Among its presidents were the psychologist William James, the philosopher Henri Bergson, the physicist Sir Oliver Lodge and the Cambridge Unitarian astrophysicist Frederick Stratton.

Contrast these open-minded true sceptics with the dogmatic 'scientism' of Hermann von Helmholtz: 'Neither the testimony of all the fellows of the Royal Society, nor even the evidence of my own senses, would lead me to believe in the transmission of thought from one person to another independently of the recognised channels of sense. It is clearly impossible.'



**Shown above:** David Taylor spoke at the USPS slot.

David outlined the main philosophical and scientific theories advanced to explain the Universe and the existence of mind and consciousness. Materialism is the theory that matter and the movement of material particles provide the ultimate explanation of all that exists, including the human mind. Idealism the theory that mind, in particular the Cosmic Mind, is the ultimate explanation of reality and Dualism the hypothesis that both mind and matter are real but neither is explicable purely in terms of the other. The phenomena of parapsychology are compatible with idealistic and dualistic worldviews but not a materialist one.

If psychic experiences can be shown to be genuine they provide solid grounds for the rejection of materialism. That is of course why dogmatic materialists reject such phenomena. William James rightly claimed that for the materialist worldview to be overturned it would take only one genuine psychic experience to be authenticated.

## Affects of near-death experiences

David turned to the evidential nature of Near Death Experiences (NDEs). Those who have them find them important and life changing – 82% say that they no longer fear death. Many find their religious faith strengthened. However, not even the most remarkable NDE will ultimately change a person's philosophic outlook if that person has a worldview in which belief in God and an afterlife has no place.

He instanced the famous case of the atheist philosopher AJ Ayer. In 1988 Ayer choked on a fish bone, went into cardiac arrest and was clinically dead for four minutes. After being revived, Ayer wrote about his experience in an article entitled 'What I saw when I was dead'. Ayer's NDE was widely publicised but he later contradicted his earlier account. However, the doctor who attended him, Dr Jeremy George, suggested that Ayer's NDE had affected him much more deeply than he later admitted.

'I asked him, as a philosopher, what was it like to have had a near-death experience? He suddenly looked rather sheepish. Then he said, "I saw a Divine Being. I'm afraid I'm going to have to revise all my various books and opinions." But of course he didn't. The pressure to conform is just too much.'

To be of value, scepticism must be informed and constructive, according to David. If we embrace Jung's 'precious gift of doubt' we come to understand that doubt is healthy, positive and necessary. As Voltaire wrote: 'Cherish those who seek the truth but beware of those who find it.'

*The Rev Feargus O'Connor is minister at Golders Green and St Albans. He has an MA in Death and Immortality from the University of Wales.*



# Unitarian College

**There was much interest at the meetings about developments at Unitarian College. As a result, more than 140 delegates packed into the Pavilion Room for the official launch event.**

Helen Mason, director, shared the vision for the new college, explaining that it exists for the training and development of all Unitarians including lay leaders, adults and children/young people as well as Ministers.

Helen also outlined the structure of the college describing the roles of the Board, the Academic Committee and the staff.

Several ministry students said they would not have been able to access ministry training in its traditional form.

The Rev Ant Howe, ministry tutor, then explained the college's approach to ministry training in more detail. He told delegates how there are five key elements to the ministry pathway: academic theology training, Unitarian ministry residentials, two placements with approved congregations, the Hibbert Trust-funded Ministry in the Making conference and two online modules (Unitarian history and Legal and Administrative matters).

Ant explained how successful completion of these five elements would ensure that all Unitarian college graduates would be able to evidence successful attainment of the 32 ministerial competences which were agreed by the Unitarian General Assembly some years ago.

The Rev Jo James, minister at Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds, explained why he had been keen to come forward and host a ministry student on placement and the value his congregation had gained from this experience.

The five ministry students who are currently working with Unitarian college (three who have completed a year already and two who will formally start training in September 2019) then spoke about why they had chosen to study with Unitarian college and how much they had enjoyed it so far. They made several important points, including how several of them would not have been able to access ministry training in its traditional form – their personal circumstances requiring the flexibility that the Unitarian college scheme offers. They also underlined how rigorous they had found the training to date, appreciating the clear information from the college about how each activity would lead to generating evidence against the 32 competences.

Helen then went on to explain how the college was working with other key Unitarian stakeholders including the GA, Harris Manchester college in Oxford and Luther King House in Manchester to make sure Unitarian college ministry students could benefit from the wide resources and relationships that previous Unitarian educators had built. Information was provided about how the college would be funded going forward, and delegates were invited to sign up as college Associates to express their support for the college and the students in a tangible manner in return for being kept up to date with college activities and being invited to contribute



*Shown above: Helen Mason, director of Unitarian College speaks to a packed session.*

ideas and feedback on the college curriculum in the future. The college was grateful to National Unitarian Fellowship for allowing their slot at the meetings also to focus on developments at Unitarian college. The following morning, under the chairmanship of the Rev Tony McNeile, Helen and Ant conducted a Q&A with the assembled delegates about the work of the college and how it would develop. Significant interest was expressed in the plans for training programmes for lay leaders, and the college's plans to work with Unitarians internationally on training and development activities. To find out more about becoming an Associate of Unitarian college, or if you have any questions or queries, please contact Helen Mason on [HMason@unitarian-college.org.uk](mailto:HMason@unitarian-college.org.uk)

## GA welcomes FUN

The Findhorn Unitarian Network (FUN) has become an affiliated Unitarian society in its third year of existence and announced plans to extend the range of Findhorn inspired activities.

The motion for affiliation was put by two members of the GA Executive committee, both of whom have taken part in a Unitarian Experience Week at the Findhorn Foundation. Speaking in favour of the motion, Ralph Catts, one of the founding members of FUN, said that the idea for FUN was in response to the GA Next Steps initiative to seek to forge connections with like-minded groups in the UK. He reported that as a result of the two successful Experience Week events, members of the Findhorn Foundation community had a greater awareness of Unitarianism and spoke positively about Unitarians who had visited the Foundation.

The AGM of the Findhorn Unitarian Network was held during the Annual Meetings and the new committee will meet up by Skype in July to decide upon events in the coming year. It is expected that there will be opportunities for FUN members to engage in selected activities at the Findhorn Foundation, possibly including a week where a group of Unitarians engage in a spiritual practice retreat at the Findhorn Foundation. Ralph Catts will continue to offer the Transformation Game ®, both as a spiritual retreat, and in a shorter format. Finally, groups of Unitarians who have not previously been to the Findhorn community will be encouraged to take part in an Experience Week at the Foundation.

Enquiries about forth-coming events can be made via the email contact address, [Findhornunitariannetwork@gmail.com](mailto:Findhornunitariannetwork@gmail.com) or by contacting Ralph Catts: [ralphunitarian@gmail.com](mailto:ralphunitarian@gmail.com)



# Like buddleia

## Injustice grows in the cracks

On this occasion, taking pride in the use of rude words.

Travelling by train into Leeds, I noticed buddleia growing on derelict land. The sight cheered me. 'Ah, Spring is coming. Watch out for butterflies, always attracted to buddleia.' It pleases me that out of that unsightly dereliction, Mother Nature raises glorious coloured flowers that bring even more glorious colours on the butterflies' wings. It reminded me of a visit I paid, some years ago, to a mission project in a woefully run-down part of Salford. The mission's literature displayed their logo, a dandelion in bloom, growing from a crack in the pavement. Inspiration for both missionaries and their flock, I thought. That in turn reminded me of Malvina Reynolds' hymn in *Hymns for Living*, 253:

*God bless the grass that grows through the crack:  
They roll the concrete over it to try to keep it back.  
The concrete gets tired of what it has to do,  
It breaks and it buckles and the grass grows through;  
And God bless the grass.*

By contrast, a *Guardian* column from Adrian Chiles leapt out at me, titled, *In Manchester and Birmingham, Buddleia is a Symbol of Neglect*. 'It is not a bad-looking thing – a splash of colour in the monochrome unloved, unproductive land and property – but how much better it would be if we lived in a country where it had nowhere to grow.' 'Those who lived through the postwar years called the buddleia the "bombsite plant".' Chiles complains that it is an invasive species, brought from China generations ago. 'Send the buddleia back to China, I say. We have too much of it here.'

I disagree. Yes, it draws our attention to neglected areas, but it thrives handsomely in cultivated gardens too, as the butterfly bush. And we need those butterflies. We also need to be inspired as nature lifts us up from the neglect that we human beings inflict. (By the way, butterflies love overripe bananas. Hang them up in the garden.) So, God bless the grass, and the dandelion, the banana and the butterflies on the buddleia. The plant was named in honour of one of those charming English country rectors who combined nature study with ministry, Adam Buddle (1662–1715). I wonder if he ever preached sermons about it.

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Among the many reports on the mass murder in the Christchurch NZ mosques, there was one that touched me. It was the picture that popped up on Facebook, of a white Manchester chap, standing outside a local mosque on the Friday of the shootings. His hand-made placard read, 'I am your friend. I will watch while you pray.'

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What do George Formby and Dusty Springfield have in common? 'Not a lot!' I hear you cry. Seven years ago, I shared this story about George's career as a ukulele-banjo player and singer-entertainer. 'In the late 1940s he toured South Africa in pre-apartheid days, refused to play to segregated audiences and

### FUNNY OLD WORLD

By John Midgley



gave no less than 20 free concerts in black African townships, much to the consternation of government officials. At one of these shows, he gave a hug to a little black girl after she had presented his wife with a box of chocolates. This was too much for Dr Daniel Malan, who later became the Nationalist Party prime minister who introduced apartheid. He phoned George to chide him for such 'despicable stunts'. George's feisty, not to say formidable wife Beryl took the call, and responded, 'Why don't you p\*ss off, you 'orrible little man!' George Formby a radical social justice campaigner? I love it.

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In April I came across a similar story in an *Observer* review of a BBC Radio2 anniversary podcast about Dusty, one of the few pop singers that I have ever really liked. She died of cancer 20 years ago. Had she lived she would now be aged 80. Reviewer Sean O'Hagan writes that in 1964, 'She went to South Africa (with her group, The Echoes) having been contractually assured she would not be performing to whites-only audiences. On arrival, she made headlines by sticking to that promise and was promptly deported by, as she scathingly put it, "government persons in raincoats". Her bassist, Dougie Reece, recalled how the airport baggage handlers, all of whom were black, formed a line, took their hats off and smiled as the group crossed the asphalt to the plane.' A message of gratitude. Dusty commented, 'I'm not political. I just think anyone who wants to buy a ticket for my show should be able to.'

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I'm mildly pleased to have been one of the few people who have published a rude word in the *Inquirer* (see above). It's a comparatively mild vulgarity and with a discreet, fig-leaf-like asterisk. I received no complaints. I'm sure that this year's Anniversary Service at the GA Annual Meetings was the first to make use of another rude word, unspoken but displayed on a large screen for us to ponder or chuckle at. Again, asterisks were used to spare the feelings of sensitive souls. It appears in the last verse of a *Galaxy Song* composed by comedian Eric Idle with John du Prez:

*So, remember when you're feeling very small and insecure  
How amazingly unlikely is your birth  
And pray that there's intelligent life somewhere up in space,  
Because there's \*\*\*\*\* all down here on Earth.*

*The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.*



# Letters to the Editor



## We must be fully human to help

Christine Avery of Plymouth Unitarians



**To the Editor** › During her eloquent Anniversary Service sermon at GA (later printed in *The Inquirer*, 16 June), Maria Curtis strongly asserted ‘We need to dethrone ourselves and see ourselves as part of nature.’ This point has been made many times in recent years because all people of intelligence and emotional literacy can see that we, the human race, are recklessly degrading our environment. But I strongly question the idea that acting like ‘part of nature’ is the solution to this deadly serious problem. Nature just does what it does, unreflectively, and if we are merely

part of nature we are going to continue to act like a plague of locusts. If we are to have any hope of ‘saving the world’ from our own heedless depredation we need to transcend nature. We must be fully human, which means that we develop and value our wide-ranging imaginations, our ability to trace consequences, and our powers of empathy and identification. Such capacities are not to be expected from animals. Arguably, valuing ourselves as humans gives us more motivation, more drive to act appropriately than the self-abasement that could just leave us feeling helpless and hopeless.

## Library has Unitarian history

Maurice Large of the Church of the Divine Unity, Newcastle upon Tyne

**To the Editor** › Viewers of the BBC series ‘A House Through Time’ based on a house in Ravensworth Terrace, Newcastle upon Tyne will have seen presenter David Olusoga researching in the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society (the Lit & Phil) library.

It may be of interest to readers to know that this library was founded in 1793 and one of its principal proponents was the Rev William Turner, our minister from 1782 to 1841. Those who have visited our present building may remember the large portrait in the vestibule of William Turner. This is a near-contemporaneous copy (done by the same artist) of a portrait of Turner which is displayed on the staircase of the Lit & Phil.

It is also noteworthy that the Newcastle *Chronicle* consulted from time to time by David Olusoga was in the mid-19th century owned and edited by members of the Unitarian congregation. It became a daily on 1 May 1858 under the editorship of another member of the congregation, Joseph Cowen, and is the predecessor of our present evening newspaper known simply as the *Chronicle*. Joseph Cowen subsequently succeeded his father as MP for Newcastle and is commemorated by a public statue in the city. Our congregation supports the Joseph Cowen Centre, helping homeless men, by collecting clothing and supplies of tea and coffee and the like.

See the programme here: <https://bbc.in/2VYYAMF>

## Don’t mention hyphen debate!

Ernest Baker

Hon. Sec., Send a Child to Hucklow  
[www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk](http://www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk)

**To the Editor** › I thank my colleague John Midgley for the puff for the Send a Child to Hucklow charity in his column, (*Inquirer*, 6 April) mentioning his kind fund-raising via the Hungarian postage stamp.

He mentions the great ‘hyphen’ debate. I can recall ... ‘passionate’ (!) discussion at SACH Trustees meetings about whether the original Send-a-Child-to-Hucklow format should be retained. Friends may recall too there was a time when I sported at Unitarian General Assembly Meetings a now well-grubby t-shirt with the legend, ‘To hyphen, or not to hyphen, that is the question!’ In these days, one wonders if the anti money-laundering, ever-vigilant banks would reject cheques so denominated!



# RESPONSE

## Diving into the mystery of God

By Maud Robinson

Inspired by two recent *Inquirer* articles – Kevin Robinson's 'Atheism and spirituality not mutually exclusive' (9 March) and Frank Walker's 'We long for goodness, for certainty' (20 April), I am prompted to try to put into writing some elusive thoughts and feelings about God.

A sentence in Frank Walker's article resonated very deeply with me: "God" is the name we give to the unutterable mystery that we confront, not as the explanation, but as the name we can give to the mystery, the name that helps us to come to terms with it.' This has certainly been the case for me. I am not a great theologian, but I am a great diver into the mystery that some call God. And I strongly defend use of God language and deep engagement with the mystery that surrounds us, as one of the ways in which we can live more deeply and compassionately in this fractured and hurting world.

### Logic and mystery

In his article my beloved brother, Kevin Robinson asked Unitarians to consider whether many more of us than might want to admit it are, in fact, atheists. He suggests that equating 'the mystery' with God is not philosophically sound. I cannot fault his logic (diving into the mystery of God is not about logic) and I have had many stimulating and good-natured conversations with him about this over the years.

In the past I have asked him whether he is not in fact an agnostic, since he is not absolutist in his contention that there is no God and he (quite rightly) counters that he has no more doubt about the non-existence of God, than I have doubt about the presence of God. I use the phrase 'presence of God' rather than 'existence of God' advisedly, as I experience God as a presence deep within me as well as beyond me, rather than as an existent Being. I respect Kevin as an atheist and he respects me as a theist. This is a good state of affairs, and my hope is for more stimulating and good-natured conversations between theists and atheists.

My relationship and journey with God has not been a straight road. There have been times I have eschewed all use of the word God, considering that there are more important outlets for my energy than wrestling with concepts of God. There have been others time I have whole-heartedly embraced, and been embraced by, God and have had a rich prayer life.

In my life and ministry now, I am more interested in how we live out our spiritual journey (engaging with community and working for justice) than in wrestling with concepts of God. However, I realise that my ability to kindle the necessary impetus and energy for such engagement and work is underpinned by my relationship with God, which has become more natural and less agonised over.

"Let us stop putting our energy into fighting our corners and redirect it into empowering ourselves spiritually."

On many mornings I start my day by opening the curtains and reciting aloud *i thank you God for most this amazing day* by EE Cummings.

One of my regular spiritual practices for personal strength and renewal is yoga nidra, a kind of meditative visualisation practice. Yoga nidra begins with a personal affirmation called a *sankalpa*; the advised practice is to give deep thought to the formulation of ones *sankalpa* and then to adopt it as a life-long affirmation. My spiritual journey has taken me down a variety of paths, which have enriched my spiritual life, but I am glad that I have stuck with the

*sankalpa* that I formulated some 20 years ago, before training for ministry.

My *sankalpa* is 'I open myself to the leadings of God in my life' and I still regularly use this during yoga nidra and in other situations. In times when I have felt ambivalent in my thinking about God, I have still felt a great opening of my being when I make that affirmation with sincerity and devotion. I don't always know what I mean when I say God, but I do know what I feel; and what I feel is supported, embraced, comforted, renewed, empowered. This is what enables me to contribute to the world what small drop of compassion I am able, and so I am happy to embrace God rather than agonise intellectually.

### End trench warfare

I am sometimes deeply saddened by the engagement within our Beloved Unitarian Community around the issue of God. Healthy debate about the existence or otherwise of God is an excellent thing, and I am delighted to look around our movement and see thriving congregations which are Christian, humanist, theist, pluralist and other. But too often I see exchanges on Unitarian social media platforms which move beyond healthy and stimulating debate and into a kind of combative trench warfare, insisting that one group or the other is being sidelined.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century there have been Unitarians who have been avowedly humanist, Christian, atheist, etc, etc. Let us stop putting our energy into fighting our corners and redirect it into empowering ourselves spiritually – in whatever way works for each of us – to build community and work for justice.



Maud Robinson

The Rev Maud Robinson is minister with Underbank Unitarian Chapel and Fulwood Old Chapel.



Lizzie Harley  
reports from  
the XR front line

# ‘We’re here for all of us’



Shown above: Lizzie Harley (centre, facing camera) marches with XR Bridport. Photo by XR Bridport

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*I do not think that the measure of a civilization is how tall its buildings of concrete are, but rather how well its people have learned to relate to their environment and fellow man. – Sun Bear, Chippewa Medicine Man*

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Bringing about significant change is not an easy path, not without sacrifice and deep soul searching. In the last month we have seen quite substantial change in the way we are talking about climate change and the environment. On Palm Sunday Rowan Williams led a meditation outside Westminster Abbey with hundreds of people from Extinction Rebellion (XR) and affiliated groups like Christian Climate Action. People of all faiths and none joined together with a common message, purpose and concern; to care for our beloved planet. They gathered in the kind of worship that Unitarians would be proud of. They recognise the challenging path ahead. It feels like it tests the inner strength of our humanity. The movement has naturally brought out a spiritual element connecting people. The way people are describing time spent with each other in this movement is full of hope, and upliftment, a spiritual experience uniting people of many different backgrounds and beliefs.

Leading up to Easter each of the geographical points of protest in London were ‘hosted’ by a different UK region. The South West had stewardship of Waterloo Bridge and they made it into a garden – 100 rebels travelled from Bridport alone. Picnic blankets, trees, flowers, plants, music, and events for children and families were all created or provided. Over 1000 arrests have been made with various methods of peaceful resistance. Farhana Yamin’s was one high-profile arrest. She is one of the most respected climate-change lawyers in the world. She has represented countries at the UN, and helped negotiate the Paris agreement. Only certain people are designated to risk arrest, the rest have a role supporting, feeding, public speaking, giving interviews and keeping people cheerful.

We saw a mostly well-organised protest, blocking bridges and streets with different ‘factions’ joining the XR team. Disrupting public transport is one of the issues the XR movement is divided about.

A ‘Solemn Intention Statement’ was read out twice daily at all the XR points in London. This, in my view, adds a worshipful element to the movement – which has surprised and delighted me.

The statement reads:

*Let’s take a moment, this moment, to consider why we are here. Let’s remember our love, for this beautiful planet that feeds, nourishes and sustains us. Let’s remember our love for the whole of humanity in all corners of the world. Let’s recollect our sincere desire to protect all this, for ourselves, for all living beings, and for generations to come.*

*We act today, may we find the courage to bring a sense of peace, love and appreciation to everyone we encounter, to every word we speak and to every action we make. We are here for all of us.*

What happens next? It would have been good to be there not as

individual ‘rogue’ Unitarians, but as a purposeful group. XR has now moved from disruption to negotiations and discussions that are taking place with government ministers. Some of our rebels from Bridport were on the Waterloo Bridge and they met with our MP Oliver Letwin’s personal assistant to arrange a meeting back in Bridport. From Bridport alone, more than 100 people spent the entire week in London (and quite a few spent the night in a cell!). Grace spent three days superglued to the underside of the holding lorry on Waterloo Bridge. Rose got arrested (and has since been elected one of the labour councillors for Bridport). The team expressed gratitude to the local churches in London who fed them, let them use their facilities and even allowed them to sleep in a crypt! The UK also became the first nation to declare a climate emergency in parliament. It will be very important to see what comes next.

I have been part of the local groups in Bridport. The chapel has hosted the NVDA training days and Rebellion Choir rehearsals. For the first Bridport Rebellion Day I walked with members of Bridport chapel and others who care deeply and want to be heard. One of the banners proclaimed, ‘You don’t have to be a Revolting teenager to march for the Climate Crisis’. Walking behind the samba drumming with a full cross-section of local society felt emotional and even joyful. Our local petrol station (at the end of the march) was informed, and courteously closed the pumps ahead of our ‘visit’.

Our county council has just declared a Climate Emergency and will join the ‘One Planet Living Framework’ which gives guidance on making change. We at the chapel have been responsible for keeping 4 tonnes of food from going to waste in the last year with our Community Fridge project. But there is much more to be done. The XR movement applauds individual efforts but feels strongly that the time has passed for isolated efforts.

In India a group of 1.5 million volunteers, children and the elderly included, planted 66 million trees in a record breaking 12 hours in 2017. I believe in every level of change, and our small Unitarian communities can make valid and needed changes to contribute. Shall we share what is working well with each other?

If we take notice, make little changes and the governments and corporations change hugely damaging practices and we find out that we are wrong about the time-frame we have left, will we have created purer air to breathe, stopped the extinction of entire species, initiated renewable energy sources, planted millions of trees for nothing?

No, we will have made a better quality of life for all beings.

And that is my solemn wish for our future.

Lizzie Harley is a Unitarian ministry student.